



## JAMES 4 A VANISHING MIST

*In this chapter James, the half-brother of Jesus, addresses some of the problems that arise for Christians: Trying to love the world and God at the same time, speaking evil of other Christians and being presumptuous about the future. -JT*

**1** What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? **2** You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. **3** When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

**4** You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. **5** Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? **6** But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

**7** Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash

your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

**11** Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister[d] or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. **12** There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

**13** Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." **14** Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. **15** Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." **16** As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. **17** If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

### STUDY NOTES

[BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org) Commentary

**Where do wars and fights come from among you?** James accurately described strife among Christians with the terms wars and fights. Often the battles that happen among Christians are bitter and severe.

**Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?** The source of wars and fights among Christians is always the same. There is some root of carnality, an internal war within the believer regarding the lusts of the flesh. No two believers who are both walking in

the Spirit of God towards each other can live with wars and fights among themselves.

"The word *kill* is startling and meant to startle; James sought to force his readers to realize the depth of the evil in their bitter hatred toward others." (Hiebert)

**Yet you do not have:** This points to the futility of this life lived for the desires for pleasure. Not only is it a life of conflict, but it is also a fundamentally unsatisfied life. This is the tragic irony of the life lived after worldly and fleshly desires; it never reaches the goal it gives everything for. This fundamental dissatisfaction is not because of a lack of effort: "If the lusters fail, it is not because they did not set to work to gain their ends; for according to their nature they used the most practical means within their reach, and used them eagerly, too." (Spurgeon)

This helps us to rationally understand the folly of living life after the lusts of the world and our animal appetites. You are tempted to fulfill a sinful desire because you think (or hope) that it may be *satisfied*, but it will *never* be satisfied. Why not accept your lack of such satisfaction now, instead of after much painful and harmful sin?

**Yet you do not have because you do not ask:** The reason these destructive desires exist among Christians is because they do not seek God for their needs (**you do not ask**). James reminds us here of the great power of prayer, and why one may live unnecessarily as a spiritual pauper, simply because they do not pray, or do not **ask** when they pray.

"If you may have everything by asking, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is, and I beseech you to abound in it... Do you know, brothers, what great things are to be had for the asking? Have you

ever thought of it? Does it not stimulate you to pray fervently? All heaven lies before the grasp of the asking man; all the promises of God are rich and inexhaustible, and their fulfillment is to be had by prayer." (Spurgeon)

**You ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures:** After dealing with the problem of no prayer, now James addressed the problem of selfish prayer. These ones, when they did ask, they asked God with purely selfish motives.

**Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?** James recognizes that we cannot both be friends of this world system in rebellion against God, and friends of God at the same time (Matthew 6:24). Even the desire to be a friend (**wants to be a friend**) of the world makes that one an **enemy of God**. The strong statements James made here remind us that all was not beautiful in the early church. They had plenty of carnality and worldliness to deal with. While the New Testament church is a clear pattern for us, we should not over-romanticize the spiritual character of early Christians.

**God resists the proud:** At the same time, James reminds us that this **grace** only comes **to the humble**. Grace and pride are eternal enemies. Pride demands that God bless me in light of my merits, whether real or imagined. But grace will not deal with me on the basis of anything in me — good or bad — but only on the basis of who God is.

"I desire to whisper one little truth in your ear, and I pray that it may startle you: You are submitting even now. You say, 'Not I; am lord of myself.' I know you think so, but all the while you are submitting to the devil. The verse before us hints at this. '**Submit yourselves unto God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.**' If you do not submit to God you never will resist the devil, and you will remain constantly under his tyrannical power. Which shall be your master, God or devil, for one of these must? No man is without a master." (Spurgeon)

It's easier to **think** and **talk about** humility and dependence on God than it is to **live** it.

**You who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit":** James rebuked the kind of heart that lives and makes its plans apart from a constant awareness of the hand of God, and with an underestimation of our own limitations.

**For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away:** James asked us to consider the fragility of human life, and the fact that we live and move only at the permission of God. James does not discourage us from planning and doing, only from planning and doing apart from reliance on God.

We also remember the story Jesus told about the rich man who made his great plans for the future, and foolishly lost it all when his soul was required of him (Luke 12:16-21). "They might easily observe that many things fall out betwixt the cup and the lip, betwixt the chin and the chalice." (Trapp)

"There are a thousand gates to death; and, though some seem to be narrow wickets, many souls have passed through them. Men have been choked by a grape stone, killed by a tile falling from the roof of a house, poisoned by a drop, carried off by a whiff of foul air. I know not what there is that is too little to slay the greatest king. It is a marvel that man lives at all." (Spurgeon)

**To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin:** James knows that it's easier to **think** and **talk about** humility and dependence on God than it is to live it. Yet he makes the mind of God plain: as we know these things, we are accountable to **do them**.

The uncertainty of life should not create fear that makes one passive or inactive. It should make us ready to recognize what is good and then do it. "This uncertainty of life is not a cause either for fear or inaction. It is always a reason for realizing our complete dependence on God." (Moffatt)

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# A VANISHING MIST



JAMES 4

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**DON'T YOU KNOW  
THAT FRIENDSHIP  
WITH THE WORLD**

**MEANS ENMITY  
AGAINST GOD?**

**JAMES 4:4**

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